

VZCZCXRO6017
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #3918/01 3500730
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 150730Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0860
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003918

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/11/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: WASIT TRIBES, SHEIKHS AND THE ELECTIONS

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(U) This is a PRT Wasit reporting cable.

¶1. (C / / REL TO USA, ACGU) Summary: In meetings with the PRT held December 5 and 7, leading representatives from three Wasit tribes explained Prime Minister Maliki's growing popularity in terms of his ability to provide security and stand up to Iran. Sheikhs who were active in the province's Support Councils expressed enthusiasm for the initiative, while another prominent tribal leader who does not participate in the program viewed it as a cynical means, reminiscent of the Saddam era, of buying support. All expressed their dissatisfaction with the present provincial government and the religious parties -- including not only ISCI but also the PM's Da'wa party. They also predicted a large turnout of voters for the provincial elections. The tribal leaders' support for Maliki will not necessarily translate into support for Da'wa, since all the sheikhs interviewed favor independent candidates. End summary.

Sheikhs Supporting Maliki

¶2. (C / / REL TO USA, ACGU) On December 5, PRT Wasit met with two local tribal sheikhs, Ali Maqsosi of the al-Maqsosi tribe and Khudayir Abbas Quamar of the al-Amara tribe. Sheikh Ali is the deputy head of his 5000-person tribe located on the southwestern side of the Tigris River in the areas of al-Kut and Shaikh Sa'ad. He also leads one of the 20 Support Councils in Wasit province. Sheikh Ali, who is also a businessman with contracts to supply food and other life-support to the Iraqi Army, claims to have received an office in al-Kut and a monthly stipend of 300,000 Iraqi Dinars (250 USD) from the Prime Minister's office.

¶3. (C / / REL TO USA, ACGU) Sheikh Khudayir comes from the much more numerous and powerful al-Amara tribe, where he is one of many lesser sheikhs. Both tribal leaders strongly support PM Maliki and the concept of Support Councils. They see the Councils as a way to tie the people to the government, strengthen the links between the tribes, and promote security. They also view the Councils as an extension of PM Maliki's office and stated that, since funding and other support for the Councils comes from the PM's office, they feel protected and believe they have access to the head of the government.

Government Big Disappointment, Except the PM

¶4. (C / / REL TO USA, ACGU) The sheikhs went on to say that the national and provincial governments are a big disappointment to the people, since they have not provided essential services and jobs. The religious parties in Kut -- including but not limited to ISCI -- were singled out as problematic and full of Iranians. The sheikhs related that they saw little enthusiasm for the government among their members, except for the personal appeal of PM Maliki.

Elaborating on this subject, they explained that Maliki owed his support to his tough security stance -- particularly against Jaysh al-Madhi (JAM). The sheikhs described this as an example of the PM's fairness.

¶5. (C/ / REL TO USA, ACGU) Both sheikhs believed large numbers would vote in the provincial elections and that all of the incumbents would be turned out of office. In particular, they stressed that they believed that Governor Latif Turfa (an independent with ties to several religious parties) would not be reelected because he had not solved any problems as governor. They reported that the present provincial government, dominated by religious parties, had not served the people, who were now Qby religious parties, had not served the people, who were now ready to vote for independent candidates that would help them. As one of the sheikhs explained, using what he said was an old Iraqi expression: "a man does not get bitten by the same snake twice."

The Third Man

¶6. (C/ / REL USA, ACGU) On December 7, the PRT met with Sami Hamza al-Abdullah, a prominent agricultural landowner and businessman from the al-Shameri tribe in northern Wasit; Sami has enjoyed close connections to Coalition Forces and the former CPA offices in Kut. Sami told the PRT that the people in his tribe are all now against the Islamic parties and that the open list will enable them to identify the right candidates to replace them. He added that PM Maliki is liked by many people primarily because he

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fought against JAM, which people know is supported by Iran. Not everyone expected Maliki to stand up to Iran, Sami explained, and their opinion of him rose considerably when he did so.

Sheikh Inflation

¶7. (C/ / REL USA, ACGU) When questioned about the present government's program to reach out to the tribes by setting up Support Councils, he was much more skeptical. "Maliki is buying the support of the tribes," he said. Sami, who is not a council member, said that last year his tribe had perhaps three sheikhs, but this year they have around 30 and that Maliki was making new sheikhs and giving them funds because the government is weak and needs the support of the tribes. He finished by stating that "this is the same thing the Baath Party had done. Once the government is strong, they will abandon the tribes."

Advice for IHEC

¶8. (C//REL USA, ACGU) All three of these tribal contacts emphasized to the PRT the importance of the elections and that their people were interested in voting. They also explained that, owing to the nature of their people and the high incidence of illiteracy in Iraq, if the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC) really wants to get the word out about the elections, especially where and how to vote, they must do it either over television or through public gatherings.

Comment

¶9. (C//REL USA, ACGU) While the two tribal sheikhs participating in the Support Councils had a dramatically different view of the Councils than the third tribal leader, all have similar views of the Prime Minister and the provincial elections. While Sami was less taken with

Maliki than the two sheikhs, he still sees him as better than the leadership of ISCI. All three contacts emphasized their dislike of the Islamic parties and what they considered to be their strong ties to Iran. Of note, even the two sheikhs who strongly supported PM Maliki stated that this support did not transfer to the Da'wa party. They gave no indication that they would back Da'wa candidates. End comment.

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